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## Dossier “Innovation and Good Practices in University Government and Management”

### ARTICLE

# Pluralist University Government. An Analysis Proposal Based on Stakeholder Theory

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Submitted in: December 2011

Accepted in: March 2012

Published in: July 2012

### Recommended citation

GAETE, Ricardo (2012). “Pluralist University Government. An Analysis Proposal Based on Stakeholder Theory”. In: “Innovation and Good Practices in University Government and Management” [online dossier].

*Universities and Knowledge Society Journal (RUSC)*. Vol. 9, No 2, pp. 296-310 UOC. [Accessed: dd/mm/yy].

<<http://rusc.uoc.edu/ojs/index.php/rusc/article/view/v9n2-gaete/v9n2-gaete-eng>>

<<http://dx.doi.org/10.7238/rusc.v9i2.1412>>

ISSN 1698-580X

### Abstract

The main aim of this article is to reflect on the possibilities of developing pluralist university government in the current political and social context, which requires university institutions to be much more open and connected to their social environments, particularly from a knowledge society perspective.

It analyses a number of aspects relating to the implementation of stakeholder participation in university government, including decision-making processes and the supervision of university activities by society, as an expression of universities' greater social responsibility.

Taking a stakeholder theory approach, it identifies the main characteristics of people, groups and institutions either affected by or interested in university affairs, and considers the importance of striking up positive relationships with the social environment.

Based on the literature in this field, the authors put forward a number of theoretical proposals to identify not only the interested parties, but also their roles in the decision-making processes of universities' day-to-day operations.

### Keywords

university government; stakeholder theory; university social responsibility; social participation; decision-making; higher education

## *Gobierno universitario pluralista. Una propuesta de análisis desde la teoría de los stakeholders*

### **Resumen**

*El objetivo principal del trabajo es reflexionar sobre las posibilidades de desarrollar un gobierno universitario pluralista en el actual contexto político y social, que demanda a las instituciones universitarias un mayor grado de apertura y vinculación con su entorno social, especialmente desde la perspectiva de la sociedad del conocimiento.*

*El artículo analiza algunos aspectos relacionados con la implementación de procesos de participación de los stakeholders en el gobierno universitario, en algunos ámbitos del proceso de toma de decisiones y fiscalización de las actividades universitarias por parte de la sociedad, como expresión de una mayor responsabilidad social de las universidades.*

*El ensayo se desarrolla desde la perspectiva de la teoría de los stakeholders para identificar las principales características que poseen las personas, los grupos o las instituciones que son afectadas por el quehacer universitario, o se encuentran interesadas en él, así como respecto de la importancia de establecer relaciones positivas con el entorno.*

*A partir de cierta bibliografía relacionada con el tema, se proponen algunos esquemas teóricos para identificar cuáles son las partes interesadas de la universidad, así como el rol que les compete en la toma de decisiones en diferentes procesos asociados al día a día universitario.*

### **Palabras clave**

*gobierno universitario, teoría de los stakeholders, responsabilidad social universitaria, participación social, toma de decisiones, educación superior*

## **1. Introduction**

Since university access was opened up to the masses, the importance of the relationship between universities and society has grown. Higher education is now among the range of aspirations, claims and needs of diverse individuals and social groups, all of whom identify knowledge and education with success and social and economic benefit.

From a theoretical perspective, one aspect that influences stakeholder identification is the way in which the analysis is shaped by an organisation's approach to social responsibility, which requires that stakeholders be placed at the centre of an institution's management practices (Cortina, 2006).

Properly identifying the interested parties is the first step in the process of implementing the concept of social responsibility in organisational management, a situation endorsed by Moneva (2007), who asserts that the first step in the strategic process of CSR<sup>1</sup> is to define the parties participating in the organisation. Along with this comes the need to identify who the stakeholders of the organisation are.

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1. Corporate social responsibility.

Since it is so important for organisations to identify such stakeholders, there is an obvious need to speak of decision-making from an institutional viewpoint, a subject which, within the organisational management sphere, is related directly to its government.

This article discusses the possibilities of applying stakeholder theory to shape pluralist university government that enables the various interested parties to participate in the decision-making processes of university affairs, beyond the typically passive role of stakeholders in accountability procedures that universities implement (e.g., by publishing social responsibility reports).

## 2. Stakeholder theory

Stakeholder theory was first systematised by R. Edward Freeman in 1984 (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Lozano, 1999; Post et al., 2002; Matten et al., 2003). From a strategic management perspective, it defines this concept as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation’s objectives” (Freeman, 1984).

A key aspect in this theory is to identify the stakeholders in each organisation, since it is often unclear who the interested parties are due to the many forms, characteristics and definitions that interest groups may take (Lozano, 1999; Hax, 2006; Setó, 2007).

Some criteria for identifying the stakeholders in an organisation are related to the distinction as to whether they are internal or external. Executives, employees and shareholders form the first group, while the second encompasses customers, suppliers, public organisations and financial entities, among others (Lozano, 1999; Moneva, 2005; Marín, 2008).

In turn, stakeholders can be classified as primary or secondary (Clarkson, 1995; Marín, 2008); all the actors connected with an enterprise’s production process are *primary* stakeholders. The environment and public administrations are *secondary* stakeholders.

It is usual for organisations to limit their identification of stakeholders to formally instituted groups (e.g. trade unions) or to groups with which they have contractual relationships (e.g., employees, customers and suppliers) (Post et al., 2002; Antonacopoulou & Meric, 2005; Hax, 2006).

Yet Mitchell et al. (1997) indicate that both the stakeholder theory put forward by Freeman in 1984 and later versions are missing the same aspect: they do not provide objective criteria for determining clearly and accurately when an individual or group qualifies as a stakeholder of an organisation.

So those authors propose three criteria that an individual, group or institution must fulfil in order to be recognised as stakeholders in an organisation:

- Power: the capacity to achieve the results they desire in a co-active manner, by using physical force, money or rules;
- Legitimacy: the generalised opinion of citizens that the actions of individuals or organisations are desirable and suitable, in accordance with the rules, values, beliefs and definitions particular to that social system;

- Urgency: the degree to which the claims of the interested parties require immediate attention, based on the existence of two conditions: (1) the claim is time-sensitive; (2) the claim is important or critical to the stakeholder.

Under these criteria, Mitchell et al. (1997) identify a typology of stakeholders based on the presence of one or more proposed elements, recognising the more dominant nature of urgency with regard to claims that stakeholders place on an organisation.

**Table 1.** Categories, attributes and types of stakeholders.

| <i>Stakeholder category</i> | <i>Attribute held</i>         | <i>Stakeholder types</i>   |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| <b>Latent</b>               | Power                         | 1. Dormant: their most immediate concern is to acquire a second attribute (legitimacy or urgency).   |
|                             | Legitimacy                    | 2. Discretionary: their relationship with the organisation moves in a philanthropic sphere, given that they neither hold power nor have any urgent claims to satisfy.    |
|                             | Urgency                       | 3. Demanding: they have a clearly formed claim, but do not possess enough force or social recognition for their claim.   |
| <b>Expectant</b>            | Power and legitimacy          | 4. Dominant: the interest, expectations and claims of these individuals or groups are important for the organisation.  |
|                             | Power and urgency             | 5. Dangerous: because the claim lacks legitimacy, it could be imposed by the use of power or regulations, or even by coercion.   |
|                             | Legitimacy and urgency        | 6. Dependent: because they lack power, they become dependent on other internal or external stakeholders to ensure that their claims are met by the organisation.         |
| <b>Definitive</b>           | Power, legitimacy and urgency | 7. Because they hold all three attributes, they become a priority stakeholder for the organisation and will demand that their claims are satisfied in a very short time. |

Source: Based on Mitchell et al. (1997)

Organisations wishing to implement a stakeholder system of management must first identify who the interested parties in their affairs are; that is, which parties will be affected by or show interest in the actions taken and decisions made by that organisation.

Then it is essential to make changes to the organisation's management to enable the interests and needs of the individuals, groups or institutions identified previously to be incorporated. It is therefore fundamental to generate spaces, instances and mechanisms in order to integrate the stakeholders into corporate government and management.

### 3. Universities' relationship with their stakeholders as a key factor for achieving pluralist university government

According to the European Commission (2008), the government structure of European universities is organised around four main bodies: (1) an executive body, represented by the figure of the university rector or president; (2) a collegiate academic body, responsible for teaching and research; (3) a decision-making body in charge of the university's strategic planning and main orientation; and (4) an advisory or supervisory body, appointed to monitor university activities, both academic and financial.

The European Commission itself (2008) states that there is a dominant, majority participation of external actors in decision-making bodies —and especially those charged with the evaluation and supervision of universities— in some European countries.

Universities as institutions created by society are not exempt from making efforts to identify stakeholders and their concerns, needs and interests. Indeed, according to Pérez and Peiró (1997), they should place more emphasis on doing so because:

universities are only legitimised if they respond to the social claims and needs for which they were created and which justify their continued existence and social dimension. If universities' sensitivity to social claims and needs is lost or annulled, then decision-making begins to be determined basically by internal politics and by the logic of corporate interests and power games played out by the different groups and bodies of the institution itself.

The European Commission (2008) also states that it is important to identify the sources that legitimise the decisions taken in the higher education sphere. Therefore, university government:

"... focuses on the rules and mechanisms by which various stakeholders influence decisions, how they are held accountable, and to whom. [...] refers to 'the formal and informal exercise of authority under laws, policies and rules that articulate the rights and responsibilities of various actors, including the rules by which they interact'..."

Thus, the concept of 'stakeholder universities' arises, which according to Jongbloed and Goedegebuure (2003) implies that universities must be in constant dialogue with their interest groups to survive in a system where claims are heterogeneous and unpredictable. Therefore, it is possible to speak of universities that are sensitive to their environment, which are capable of effectively managing relationships with their interested parties and of developing permanent links with their stakeholders that, over time, guarantee reciprocity and receptiveness.

But above all, it is possible to speak of universities' capacity to identify what the needs and problems of their stakeholders are, shouldering them as their own when defining their institutional objectives, normally described in their strategic plans, where the presence of interested parties should be explicit and manifest (Gaete, 2010).

Nevertheless, Burrows (1999) claims that simply identifying universities' interested parties is not

sufficient, since it is a first step that offers no efficient solution for understanding or prioritising stakeholders' claims. Burrows proposes four dimensions according to their concerns and claims: location, state of participation, potential for cooperation or threat, and their relevance in and influence over the organisation.

The location of stakeholders describes the classic dimension that distinguishes between organisations' internal and external interested parties. The state of participation refers to both active and passive stakeholders: the former are those with whom the organisation maintains some form of exchange, transaction or legal obligation; while passive stakeholders are those who have been or may be affected involuntarily by university actions.

The third dimension proposed by Burrows distinguishes between the interested parties' potential for cooperation or threat with regard to achieving their objectives, which implies integrative or defensive strategies in each case. Finally, a distinction should be made between the type of interest (institutional, financial and social dependence) and the type of influence (formal, economic and political) used by stakeholders to achieve their aims.

In short, 'stakeholder universities' according to Brunner (2011) are characterised by the following aspects:

- They combine the collegiate traditions and self-government of universities with the claims of external stakeholders.
- They give priority to the public good while operating in a competitive environment, applying the postulates of new public management.
- They separate strategic management bodies from academic affairs.

Universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot be oblivious to the need to incorporate stakeholders into corporate government. The presence of society's representatives in university government strengthens interdependence and interactivity between universities and society (Pérez & Peiró, 1997); it entails multiple benefits for all the actors that interact in this form of university government; and it is vital to go beyond the figure of the Board of Trustees in Spanish universities, for example, with regard to the incorporation of stakeholders into university government and also, albeit gradually, into other spheres of university affairs.

Likewise, Rodríguez et al. (2007) state that participation in corporate government implies building interest networks and applying collaboration strategies, thus reinforcing stakeholders' joint supervision of others' actions, and they propose various mechanisms for pluralist government to identify different levels of interested parties' participation:

According to Kehm (2011), greater stakeholder participation in universities' decision-making presupposes an evolution from the concept of government to 'governance', which reflects a weakening of state-led and academic-led coordination models, as a result of which the model based on stakeholder needs is strengthened. Furthermore, Kehm states that the concept of governance implies the participation of social actors in decision-making, their inclusion in decision-making structures and, concurrently, greater coordination of decision-making procedures, which is why it is necessary to determine the degree of legitimacy that each stakeholder possesses to participate in university decision-making processes.

Table 2. Mechanisms for pluralist corporate government

| <i>Level</i>            | <i>Aim</i>   | <i>Focus of the relationship</i>   |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| Remaining passive       | No aim or relationship exists.   | The organisation does not relate to its stakeholders. Their concerns are voiced through protests, letters, the Internet, etc.  |
| Monitoring              | To find out stakeholders' opinions.  | Monitoring the media and the Internet. Second-hand reports from other stakeholders (one-off interviews).   |
| Informing               | To inform or educate stakeholders.   | Bulletins, letters, pamphlets, reports and websites. Speeches, talks and public presentations. Access to the facilities and routes. Press releases and press conferences, advertising. |
| Performing transactions | To work together in a contractual relationship in which one partner directs the objectives and provides the funds.                   | Alliances between the public and private sectors, private funding initiatives, subsidies, marketing with cause, lobbying.  |
| Consulting              | To obtain information and opinions from stakeholders on which to base internal decisions.  | Surveys, focus groups, evaluation of work environments, individual and public meetings, work meetings, consultation forums, online forums, opinion surveys.                            |
| Participating           | To work directly with stakeholders to ensure that their concerns are understood and taken into account in decision-making processes. | Multiple stakeholder forums, consultation panels, processes for reaching consensus, participatory decision-making processes.   |
| Collaborating           | To join or form a network of stakeholders to reach consensus and develop joint action plans.   | Joint projects, voluntary initiatives involving two or more stakeholders.  |
| Delegating              | To delegate decisions on a specific topic to stakeholders.   | Democratic stakeholder government (e.g., members, shareholders, members of special committees, etc.).  |

Source: Based on Rodríguez et al. (2007)

Lastly, it should be noted that certain obstacles arise from the university system itself, hindering stakeholder participation in university decision-making:

Table 3. Obstacles that hinder stakeholder participation in universities

| <i>Internal sphere</i>   | <i>External sphere</i>   |
|--|--|
| Excessive rigidity of the organisational structure, organised in an extremely vertical, hierarchical manner, making participation by external actors unfeasible or not sufficiently operational. | The genuine interest that stakeholders show in actively participating in university decisions.   |
| The high degree of specialisation existing in faculties fragments the organisational culture, which leads to power groups that are not interested in opening up participation spaces.            | The stakeholders' negative perception of the importance and relevance of their participation, due to the fact that it is either a legal imposition on universities or a passing fad. |
| Regulations governing administrative procedures, especially those of public universities.  | Excessive technical and procedural complexity impedes effective participation in decision-making.  |
| Universities' inexperience when it comes to implementing more participatory decision-making processes.   | The incapacity of stakeholders to see participation as an opportunity to solve their own problems.   |

Source: Adapted from Gaete (2009)



Thus, universities will operate more efficiently and successfully if they manage to adapt their government and governance structures and procedures to the claims of their environment (Brunner, 2011). Of particular importance here is the implementation of processes of greater stakeholder participation in university management and decision-making, as a strategy whereby universities adapt to the requirements of the current knowledge society.

## 4. Proposal for incorporating stakeholder participation in university government

This proposal seeks to place emphasis on identifying and analysing university stakeholders from the viewpoint of their characteristics or attributes, to facilitate their participation in the evaluation of decisions and the supervision of activities relating to university affairs, as an expression of pluralist university government.

### 4.1. Identification and classification of university stakeholders

Based on the approaches of Mitchell et al. (1997) and Burrows (1999), we propose the following matrix for analysing the characteristics or dimensions that each stakeholder possesses, as well as their location in relation to university affairs.

In terms of the way in which this matrix works, the first column should contain all the individuals, institutions or groups that each university considers to be its interested parties; these are the parties that it intends to identify and classify as stakeholders. In the example, the classification of interested parties is the one proposed by the European Commission (2008), marking their location as internal or external.

Next, in relation to the stakeholders' dimensions or main characteristics, three of the dimensions proposed by Burrows (1999) are used, without incorporating information on the degree of interest in and influence over the organisation into the matrix, due to the fact that these aspects are related to the power, legitimacy and urgency noted by Mitchell et al. (1997); this avoids a duplication of information on similar matters.

The dichotomous nature of the matrix in this sphere encourages universities to evaluate stakeholders according to each pair of proposed alternatives (location, role and stance), which may change according to the topic for which the analysis is being performed.

In the third part of the matrix, in order to characterise the stakeholders' interest in or influence over university affairs, the three stakeholder categories that can be configured in line with the approach of Mitchell et al. (1997) are collated according to the combination of criteria proposed by those authors (power, legitimacy and urgency).



Table 4. Stakeholder identification matrix

| Stakeholders                    | Dimensions<br>(according to Burrows) |   |                                      |  |                                      |  | Stakeholder categories<br>(according to Mitchell et al.) |               |           |           |           |           |            |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|--|--|---------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
|                                 | Location<br>Int. / Ext.              |   | Participation<br>Active /<br>Passive |  | Potential<br>Cooperation /<br>Threat |  | Latent   |               |           | Expectant |           |           | Definitive |
|                                 |                                      |   |                                      |  |                                      |  | Dormant  | Discretionary | Demanding | Dominant  | Dangerous | Dependent | Priority   |
|                                 |                                      |   |                                      |  |                                      |  |  |               |           |           |           |           |            |
|                                 |                                      |   |                                      |  |                                      |  | 1  | 2             | 3         | 4         | 5         | 6         | 7          |
| Regional government             | X                                    |   |                                      |  |                                      |  |  |               |           |           |           |           |            |
| Employers                       | X                                    |   |                                      |  |                                      |  |  |               |           |           |           |           |            |
| National students' associations | X                                    |   |                                      |  |                                      |  |  |               |           |           |           |           |            |
| Trade unions                    | X                                    |   |                                      |  |                                      |  |  |               |           |           |           |           |            |
| Civil society                   | X                                    |   |                                      |  |                                      |  |  |               |           |           |           |           |            |
| Graduates                       | X                                    |   |                                      |  |                                      |  |  |               |           |           |           |           |            |
| Students' parents               | X                                    |   |                                      |  |                                      |  |  |               |           |           |           |           |            |
| University government           |                                      | X |                                      |  |                                      |  |  |               |           |           |           |           |            |
| Employees                       |                                      | X |                                      |  |                                      |  |  |               |           |           |           |           |            |
| Students                        |                                      | X |                                      |  |                                      |  |  |               |           |           |           |           |            |

Source: Own elaboration (2012)

## 4.2. Stakeholder participation in university government and management

In the quest to provide specific examples of this type of participation, worthy of note is the existence of various good practices on this matter in Spanish universities' social responsibility reports:<sup>2</sup>

From these reports, it was found that several Spanish universities are making efforts to balance out the distribution of university government posts according to gender, through their equal opportunities offices. In university management, some institutions acknowledge the application

2. An analysis of content of a comparative nature was performed on fifteen university social responsibility reports, of Spanish universities that provide online access to such documents.

of social responsibility criteria when contracting and selecting suppliers, or the fact that they have signed up to the principles of the Global Compact. They stress that both initiatives promote greater interaction with their stakeholders and expand participation spaces.

**Table 5.** Good practices of stakeholder participation in university government and management in Spain

| <i>University</i>                                | <i>Good practices</i>   | <i>Report period</i> |
|--|---|----------------------|
| UNED – National University of Distance Education | • Institutional social responsibility committee formed by internal actors and representatives of social organisations.  | 2009/2010            |
| UNIA – International University of Andalusia     | • UNIA environmental steering group, formed by representatives of specialist external organisations and academics from other Spanish universities.                                  | 2008                 |
| University of Murcia                             | • Multi-stakeholder dialogue with an active listening system, via an online questionnaire to evaluate university actions.   | 2009/2010            |
| University of Santiago de Compostela             | • Existence of a trade union participation board.   | 2006/2007            |
| University of A Coruña                           | • Implementation of an electronic voting system to elect university government representatives.   | 2010                 |
| University of Cadiz                              | • Participation of social and economic actors in: the development of new curricula; identification of society's educational needs; and competencies that graduates need to acquire. | 2008/2009            |
| University of Cantabria                          | • Consultation with stakeholders on their relationship with the university, using semi-structured interviews and focus groups.  | 2009/2011            |

Source: Own elaboration (2012)

Finally, a proposal for participatory evaluation techniques and categories is being developed so that stakeholders can participate in some of the main affairs of university government and management.

In the case of the matrix shown above, certain aspects of university management are identified where the participation of different kinds of stakeholders can be incorporated, in accordance with the topic being analysed.

In the last two columns of the matrix, various aspects relating to the interested parties' participation in universities are proposed. The levels of participation and the evaluation techniques are distinguished to act as a guide for the roles and ways in which each stakeholder can participate in university decision-making.

Table 6. Matrix for stakeholder participation in university management

| <i>Sphere of participation</i>                      | <i>Participating stakeholders (examples)</i> | <i>Level of participation (Rodríguez et al., 2007)</i> | <i>Participatory evaluation technique<sup>3</sup></i> |
|---|--|--|---|
| Strategic plan development                          | Teaching staff                               | Collaboration  | Consensus conferences                                 |
|   | Non-academic staff                           |  |   |
|   | Senior managers                              |  |   |
|   | Unions                                       |  |   |
|   | Board of trustees                            |  |   |
|   | Students                                     |  |   |
|   | Businesses                                   |  |   |
| Accreditation processes                             | Teaching staff                               | Consultation   | Citizen panels  |
|   | Students                                     |  |   |
|   | National accreditation agency                |  |   |
|   | Employers                                    |  |   |
|   | Graduates                                    |  |   |
|   | Conference of rectors                        |  |   |
|   | Ministry of education                        |  |   |
| Annual budget formulation                           | Board of directors                           | Participation  | Participatory budgets                                 |
|   | Trade unions                                 |  |   |
|   | Students                                     |  |   |
|   | Regional government                          |  |   |
|   | City council                                 |  |   |
| Definition of institutional policies and procedures | Teaching staff                               | Participation  | Quality circles or studies                            |
|   | Non-academic staff                           |  |   |
|   | Students                                     |  |   |
|   | Senior managers                              |  |   |
|   | Trade unions                                 |  |   |
|   | Board of trustees                            |  |   |
|   | Suppliers                                    |  |   |

Source: Adapted from Gaete (2009)

3. The classification of instruments and mechanisms to facilitate civil society's participation in decision-making is the one proposed by Gomà and Font (2001).

## 5. Conclusions

In recent decades, universities have been exposed to the impact of numerous social changes, and in particular to the phenomenon of mass access to higher education, thus eliminating the elitism that had been the dominant expression of university education for many centuries. A large and growing sector of post-modern society has the need and aspiration to become involved in university affairs, especially in relation to the training of university professionals.

Thus, one of the most important challenges that 21<sup>st</sup>-century universities face is the formation of permanent, reciprocal relationships with society, and in particular with individuals, groups and institutions that are affected by or interested in university affairs; that is, their stakeholders.

In that context, it seems logical and consistent that universities should develop government structures of a participatory nature, in which stakeholders can become actively involved in decision-making processes and in the supervision of university activities, especially of the results obtained by such higher education institutions.

Pluralist university government should not be associated with one specific or isolated practice; on the contrary, opening up participation spaces in university decision-making processes should be linked to their social responsibility, thus enabling them to meet the claims and needs that society currently demands of universities.

The possibilities for stakeholder participation in university government will undeniably be limited by the legal frameworks of each country, especially in the case of public universities. This is not, however, an excuse for university institutions not to apply—or to curtail the application of—the approaches formulated in this article, especially those relating to the strengthening of an organisational culture in which actors outside the university participate.

The proposals made and the analysis performed in this article clearly do not seek to impinge upon the principle of autonomy that university institutions possess in order to carry out their fundamental tasks: teaching and research. On the contrary, the possibilities of stakeholder participation described here aim to incorporate the contributions of interested parties into decision-making processes, and particularly so in the areas of university government and management.

Thus, universities are faced simultaneously with the opportunity and the challenge of implementing spaces, processes or instances of stakeholder participation in university government, transforming universities into a sphere into which society not only feels effectively integrated, but also involved as part of an institution that should have no other purpose than to respond to social concerns. This will counteract the endogamy that has generally existed in universities since their creation in the Middle Ages.

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